

Early Anglo Settlement

Ownership of the Whipple Strip was a never-ending source of contention, first between the United States and Mexico and then, following the purchase, between California and New Mexico Territory. This uncertainty impeded settlement of the area until the advent of steamboats during the 1850s. As early as 1850, George Johnson drew up a map of land claims along the Colorado River in the vicinity of the Narrows, but there is no indication that anyone other than ferryman Louis Jaeger actually established themselves in the area by that early date (Land Claims 1850). Jaeger apparently lived downstream from the Narrows, on the California side of the Colorado River. From a military map of the area drawn in 1853 (Figure 19) it appears that no structures existed between the military camp and Jaeger's ferry (Swanson and Altschul 1991:31).

The first house on the Whipple Strip was built in 1853 by Mrs. Sarah Bowman, the mess cook at Fort Yuma. Some sources indicate that Mrs. Bowman operated a brothel at this location (Sterner 1990:27), although this has never been conclusively demonstrated. She later sold her house to the camp's sutler, George F. Hooper, who operated a mercantile named Hooper and Hinton (Sterner 1990:29). This store became the center of a small community consisting of a few adobe buildings that later became known as Arizona City (Lingenfelter 1978:15).

By the late 1850s, several small communities, which would later constitute the town of Yuma, began emerging in the area of the Yuma Crossing. Arizona City took shape in the area of the Hooper and Hinton store, while Colorado City, which was laid out by Charles Poston in 1854 (Martin 1954:178-180), also developed into some sort of a community. It is unclear whether Colorado City later became Arizona City or whether the two settlements were independent and contemporary (Doyle et al. 1984:94). In addition to these communities, Jaeger established his own settlement on the California side of the Colorado River in the immediate vicinity of his ferry. For awhile, "Jaeger City" claimed a hotel, two stores, two blacksmiths, the Overland Mail office, and several other buildings (Lingenfelter 1978:15).

The growth of the Yuma Crossing settlements was supported by the establishment of formal stage-coach service during the late 1850s, which greatly improved communication and transportation to the area. Leach's Federal Wagon Road was opened between Yuma and El Paso in 1858, and the establishment of the Yuma Crossing stop on the Butterfield Overland Mail Route in that same year brought travelers to the area on their way between St. Louis and San Francisco. The Civil War temporarily closed the stage routes passing through the Yuma Crossing, but after the war, stage service to California resumed before being permanently discontinued in the 1870s (Doyle et al. 1984:72).

Advent of the Steamboat

The need to supply Fort Yuma reliably and cost-effectively led directly to the introduction of steamboats on the Colorado River. As the transport via the overland route from San Diego proved to be prohibitively expensive, government officials investigated the feasibility of supplying the fort by sea. In 1850 Lieutenant George Horatio Derby was charged with traveling up the mouth of the Colorado to determine the navigability of the river. With a cargo of 10,000 rations, Derby set sail on board the tiny schooner *Invincible*, commanded by Captain Alfred H. Wilcox. Derby had with him the latest maps of the lower Colorado region prepared in 1826 by British naval Lieutenant R. W. H. Hardy, which mistakenly placed the confluence of the Gila only 25 miles above the mouth of the Colorado—it was in reality another 120 miles further upriver. By the time Derby reached this point and discovered the errors of Hardy's maps, the ship began experiencing difficulties and Captain Wilcox decided not to travel further upriver. Although the *Invincible* failed to reach its destination at Fort Yuma, Derby realized that the Colorado could be navigated by steamboat and offered his recommendations about the type of boat best suited for the task (Lingenfelter 1978:5,8).

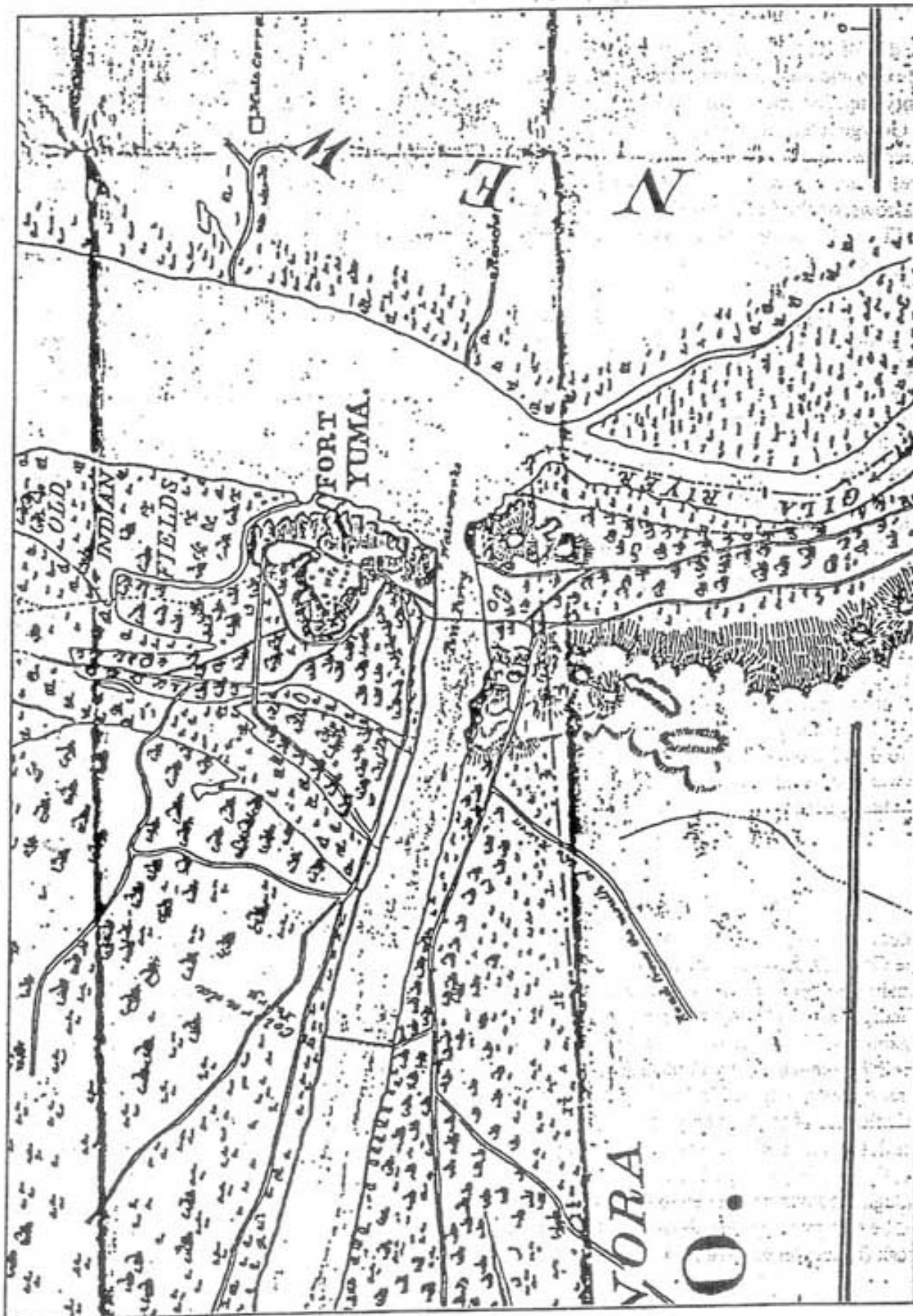


Figure 19. Map of the Yuma Crossing, 1853 (from Neyeril 1853).

Derby's discovery opened up the possibility for a more efficient way to supply the fort and soon led to a new era for the Yuma Crossing. His advice, however, was not immediately followed. George Johnson and Ben Hartshorne, former partners in one of the early Yuma ferry ventures, accepted a contract to supply Fort Yuma and unwisely decided to transport the cargo on two large flatboats using poles to propel them upriver. After the failure of this effort in the winter of 1852, the army issued a new supply contract, this time to Captain James Turnbull, who proposed to deliver supplies to Fort Yuma from the mouth of the river by steamboat, as Derby had earlier suggested. Turnbull purchased a small steam tug in San Francisco, disassembled it, and had it shipped with supplies for the fort on board the schooner *Capacity*. After reassembling the boat, Turnbull pointed the *Uncle Sam* upriver on November 18, 1852, and began the journey to the Yuma Crossing. The *Uncle Sam* finally arrived at the landing at Fort Yuma in early December (Lingenfelter 1978:9-11).

The success of the first steamer was so great that Turnbull went back to San Francisco to purchase a more powerful engine for his boat. But upon his return to the Yuma Crossing, Turnbull learned that the *Uncle Sam* had sunk, and he soon gave up his plans to continue in the steamboat business. George Johnson, on the other hand, was finally convinced of the potential of the steamboat, and, with partners Ben Hartshorne and Captain Alfred H. Wilcox, secured a new supply contract for Fort Yuma. Johnson purchased a steamer that was larger and more powerful than the *Uncle Sam*, which he dubbed the *General Jessup* (in honor of the U.S. quartermaster general who awarded him the contract). The boat arrived at Fort Yuma with its first cargo on January 18, 1854 (Lingenfelter 1978:11).

The *General Jessup* was an immediate financial success and the partners soon had more business than they could handle. A shipyard was erected across the river from Fort Yuma, where boats and barges were constructed to meet the rising demand for river transportation. A dry dock and shipyard were also in operation at Port Isabel, at the mouth of the river. Johnson established an elaborate network of piers, docks, and wood yards to facilitate movement of materials up the river. These landings were spaced about 30 miles apart (one day's voyage) and enabled the steamers to refuel while docking for the night. During the 1860s and 1870s, another wood yard was set up at Hualapai Smith's and a new landing was established to serve the Colonia Lerdo located on the mesa just east of the river (Lingenfelter 1978:60). Of these stops, all but one were located on Mexico soil; Pedrick's was just north of the boundary line between Sonora and Arizona and was the last stop passed going upriver before Fort Yuma. Because of difficult stretches of river encountered between Pilot Knob and Fort Yuma, passengers frequently debarked at Ogden's Landing and proceeded north along a road connecting the landing with the Yuma ferry crossing (Figure 20) (Sykes 1937:31).

Although most of the wood yards were in Mexico, the owners were all Americans. They hired Cocopah and Quechan Indians to cut and haul the wood to the yards and then sold it to the passing steamers for a handsome profit (Lingenfelter 1978:12). One early riverboat passenger recalled the captain of the boat pulling into one of these yards to refuel. After he blew the whistle, Indians came running to greet the boat with armloads of wood, which was purchased for \$2 per cord (Gordon 1990:30). No doubt the collection of wood for fuel had a marked impact on the vegetation in the vicinity of the river during the heyday of steamboating along the Colorado.

The increasing steamboat traffic also had a profound effect on the Cocopah and Quechan tribes, whose traditional territories were traversed by the lower Colorado River. The thriving river trade brought members of these tribes in closer contact with non-Indians and exposed them to new wares, foods, and clothing. As the lure of the Euroamerican settlements at the Yuma Crossing grew between the 1860s and 1880s, some Quechan and Cocopah men found work as woodcutters or as deckhands aboard the steamboats. The Indians aided the boat captains with their knowledge of the complicated and changing courses of the river. Despite their navigation skills, the Cocopah and Quechan deckhands received but a fraction of the pay received by other crew members. The monthly salaries of a typical steamboat crew at this time were \$200 for the captain, \$160 to \$200 for the engineer, \$75 each for the first mate, fireman, and cook, \$40 for the assistant fireman, \$25 for the steward, \$35 for Yankee deckhands, \$25 for Sonoran and

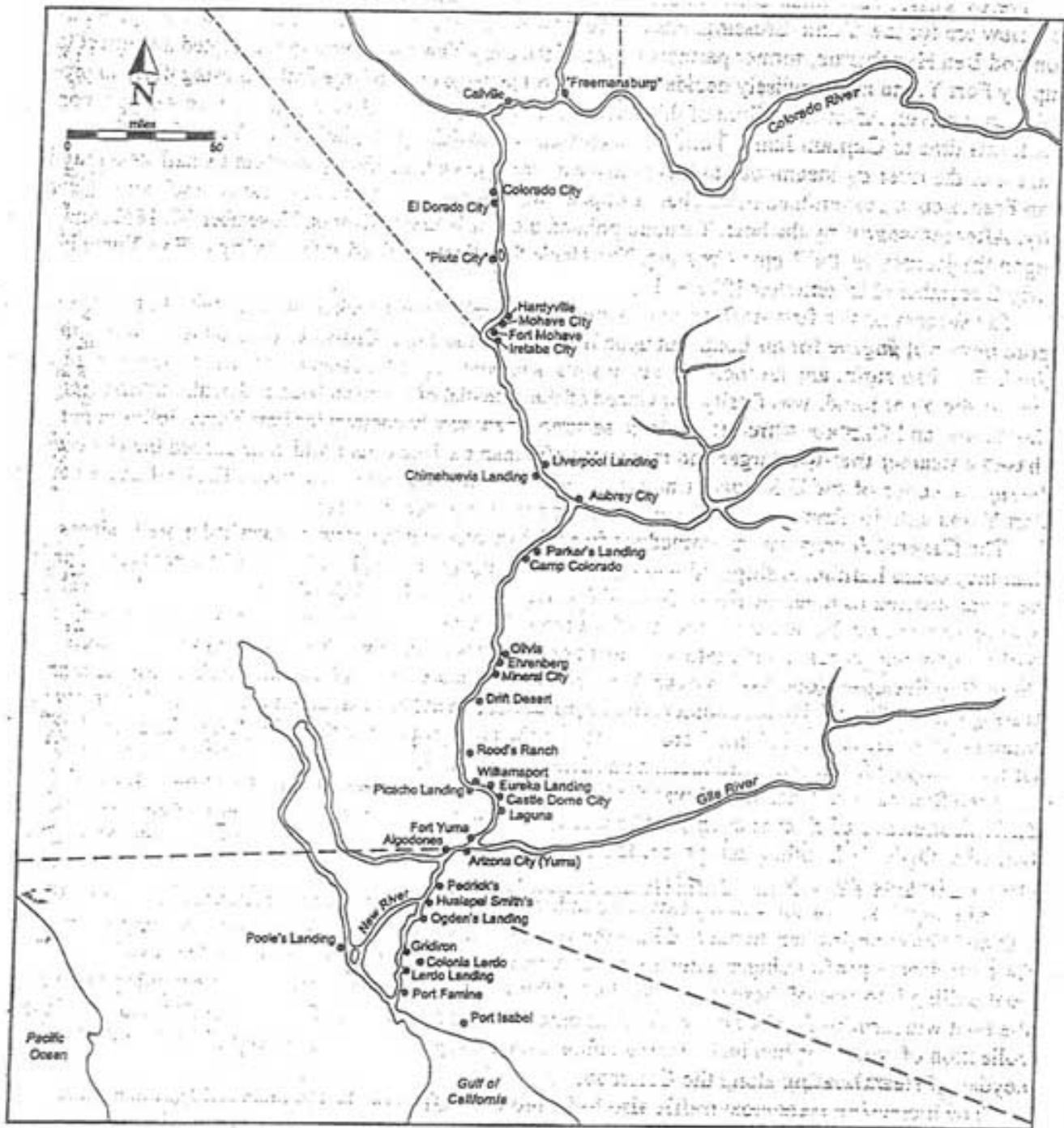


Figure 20. Steamboat landings on the Colorado (adapted from Lingenfelter 1978:34).

Kanaka deckhands, and \$15 for Cocopah, Quechan, and Mohave deckhands (Lingenfelter 1978:51). Although earning relatively meager wages, the Cocopah and Quechan men employed in the steamer industry were brought more fully into the market economy. As these individuals began to frequent the fort and the growing town in the late nineteenth century, they spent less time engaged in traditional subsistence practices and cultural activities (Bee 1981:19; de Williams 1974:37-38).

Impacts of the Civil War

Prior to the start of the Civil War, Fort Yuma served as the center of the federal military presence along the Colorado River. As union troops were transferred to assist with the war efforts, Fort Yuma was temporarily abandoned for a time between 1861 and 1862 when the garrison stationed there was recalled to California (Swanson and Altschul 1989:51). In the spring of 1862, an expedition of Confederate forces ventured into the New Mexico territory as far west as Tucson before being pushed back to Texas. This event, and the discovery of strong sympathies among the residents of the southern portions of California and the New Mexico territory, alarmed federal authorities and caused them to focus new attention on the region. As a means to split up a potential block of Southern sympathizers, the federal government separated the Arizona territory from New Mexico in 1863 (Walker and Bufkin 1979:25).

Federal troops were again stationed at Fort Yuma and established the Yuma Quartermaster's Depot in 1864 on a portion of the Fort Yuma Military Reserve on the southern side of the Colorado River. The depot was officially established on January 22, 1867 and was separated from the operations of Fort Yuma the following year (Kerckhoff 1976:7). The depot served to store military supplies arriving by steamboat or overland from California before being shipped to their final destinations. After the conclusion of the Civil War, a number of new military facilities were established throughout the Southwest and the Yuma Quartermaster's Depot played a central role in supplying these outposts. A total of 14 camps and forts received supplies from Yuma, including Fort Yuma, Fort Mojave, Fort Whipple, Camp Lincoln/Fort Verde, Fort Goodwin, Fort Breckenridge, Fort Bowie, and Camp Lowell (Walker and Bufkin 1979:26). Many of these installations were also linked by telegraph lines from Yuma as early as 1873 (Sterner and Bischoff 1997:26).

The Yuma Quartermaster's Depot was served by a fleet of steamboats and barges belonging to the Colorado Steam Navigation Company. Inland military posts not served by the steamers received their supplies by mule trains, which set out under military escort from the depot. As many as 900 mules were kept at the depot at one time to serve the military freighting needs (Hinton 1854:249). Privately operated wagon trains also used Yuma as a staging area for distributing supplies throughout the territory (Swanson and Altschul 1989:55). A few Yuma-area farmers learned from the local Native Americans how to plant and cultivate a wild grass that grew on the lowlands that were inundated by the Spring floods of the Colorado and Gila Rivers. The farmers sold this as hay for as much as \$60 per ton to the teamsters, who often stocked up on supplies in Yuma for their return trip and then cached sacks of grain at feeding and watering stations spaced roughly a day's journey apart along their routes. Prominent Yuma-area settlers who raised and sold hay to supply these mule teams included Jose Maria Redondo and James M. Barney. The mule trains and network of way stations continued to serve the inland military posts and points of commerce until the arrival of the railroad made them unnecessary (Gordon 1990:55).

The Civil War and the related military activity in Arizona led to a dramatic rise in the population around Fort Yuma. In 1860, there were only 85 people reported in the Yuma Crossing area; by 1870, the population had soared to 1,144, making Arizona City (the 1862 flood of the Colorado River virtually wiped out both Jaeger City and Colorado City; Arizona City, which was situated on slightly higher ground, survived to form the core of what would later become the town of Yuma in 1873) the second largest settlement in the Arizona territory (Doyle et al. 1984:94).

The population and importance of Arizona City continued to grow during the decade following the Civil War. In 1871 the Territorial Legislature made Arizona City the new seat of Yuma County, replacing La Paz (which had experienced a sharp decline in population as a result of the exhaustion of the area's mineral resources and a change of course in the Colorado River that left the town high and dry [Walker and Bufkin 1979:31]). During this same year Arizona City established its first newspaper, the *Yuma Sentinel*. The name of the town was officially changed to Yuma in 1873. The Arizona Territorial Prison was built in Yuma between 1875 and 1876 on a prominent hill on the south side of the Yuma

Crossing. The prison remained in use until 1909, when it was relocated to its current location in Florence, Arizona.

The structure of the community changed dramatically in 1877 with the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad. With the development of fast, reliable overland transportation, the need for steamers from California, and the depot itself, were sharply curtailed. The Yuma Crossing became less vital to the U.S. military, which was quick to transfer operations to the railroad industry. The decline of the Quartermaster's Depot was swift, and it was virtually abandoned by 1880. The military formally abandoned the depot in 1883, after which time the grounds were transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior (Swanson and Altschul 1991:55).

Arrival of the Railroad

Recognizing the increasing need for transportation service into and across the Arizona Territory during the 1860s and 1870s, the Southern Pacific Railroad provided a more reliable and efficient link between Arizona and California with the construction of a new southern line that passed through Yuma. By June 1877, construction crews of the Southern Pacific Railroad had reached the California side of the Yuma Crossing. The line was finally extended across the Colorado River by September, after some intense wrangling with local military authorities. An early wooden swing-span bridge (constructed to span the 600 feet across the Colorado River at a cost of \$200,000) served as the earliest rail bridge, but was destroyed in 1884. The bridge was rebuilt, destroyed by fire the next year, and finally replaced with a steel structure in 1895. The present-day railroad bridge across the Colorado River, located approximately 1,000 feet upstream from the original location, was completed in 1926. The 1895 steel bridge, which crossed at Madison Avenue, has been removed and only the concrete platform for the swing-span bearing remains at its original location (Stone 1988:6).

Soon after the completion of the first bridge across the Colorado, the Southern Pacific advanced rail service across Arizona, reaching Tucson in 1880 and extending across New Mexico to a junction with the Texas Pacific railroad near El Paso in 1881. By this time, Yuma had become well connected with the markets and populations of California and the east and the community flourished. To serve the influx of passenger traffic and commerce passing through Yuma by rail, the Southern Pacific constructed a new complex immediately east of the tracks on the Arizona side of the bridge that featured rail spurs, warehouses, a water reservoir, and a large hotel and train depot building (Stone 1988:6). The activity resulting from the railroad also led to a significant increase in the town population and the expansion of the downtown area (Sterner 1990:15-17). In 1881, businesses in Yuma included two hotels, one restaurant, four general merchandise stores, four grocery and variety stores, two drug stores, one stationary shop, three butcher shops, two blacksmith shops, one saddle and harness shop, four barber shops, four Chinese washhouses, three attorneys, two telegraph offices, and eleven saloons (Robertson 1942:101).

The Impact of Development on Native-American Communities

The establishment a permanent military post at Fort Yuma in 1852, the commerce brought by the arrival of first the steamboat and later the railroad, and the growth of the neighboring community of Yuma engendered significant changes in the settlement patterns and cultural autonomy of the Quechan Indians during the mid-nineteenth century. These changes brought the Quechan in closer contact with Euroamerican society and its market economy and signaled the beginning of the end of their traditional way of life. They began wearing Euroamerican clothes, eating Euroamerican food, and their seasonal rounds were curtailed (Hogan 1998:24). This situation worsened as some Quechan accepted low-paying jobs in town or on steamboats and devoted less time to their traditional farming practices. In addition, the desire of

some Yuma settlers and commercial interests for the fertile lands farmed by the Quechan led to the creation of the Fort Yuma Reservation in 1884.

As mentioned earlier, although the 45,000 acres of land set aside for the Quechan at this time was sizeable, it was only a small portion of the territory that the tribe had previously controlled. Further, the reservation boundaries ignored the traditional settlement locations of the Quechan, resulting in internal conflicts. Prior to the establishment of the reservation, the Quechan recognized themselves as a single tribal group geographically separated into a series of settlements or rancherias. Bee (1983:87) has identified the location of six rancherias believed to have been in existence in the region in the late nineteenth century: North Dwellers, near Indian Hill; Xuksil, near Pilot Knob; the Sunflower Eaters, about 15 miles northeast of Indian Hill; Somerton Group, near the present-day town of Somerton; Townsend Group, about 6½ miles east of Indian Hill; and Blythe Group, which earlier lived near the present-day city of Blythe, California (had recently relocated about 3 miles northeast of Pilot Knob). However, the seasonal migrations of extended family groups has presented difficulties in determining the exact locations of rancherias and the movement patterns of the people. Because the Fort Yuma Reservation encompassed the traditional territory of the Blythe Group and the North Dwellers, federal officials tried to convince the inhabitants of the four outlying rancherias to move to the reservation. The creation of the reservation served to gain control of prime land previously occupied by the Quechan and to help assimilate tribal members into the mainstream American culture (Bee 1989:57). To help in this latter goal, the government established a boarding school in 1886 and awarded the contract for school staffing and administration to the Catholic church. The school, which required the attendance of children from all of the Quechan rancherias, contributed significantly to the loss of traditional ways among the tribe's younger generation.

During the early 1890s, federal officials began making plans to allot the land on the Fort Yuma Reservation. This process, which was authorized by the 1887 General Allotment or Dawes Act, was intended to divide reservations into individual plots and give Indians more incentive to farm their lands. The allotment issue stirred up controversies within the tribe, but in 1893 the Quechan were persuaded to sign an agreement limiting individual holdings to five acres and free irrigation water from a series of ditches and canals to be constructed by the government. The remainder of the reservation land was to be sold at public auction, the proceeds of which would go to help finance the development of the Quechan allotments (Bee 1989:61-64). The Quechan have vigorously challenged the legality of this agreement, and after lengthy negotiations with Department of the Interior officials, 25,000 acres of the original 1884 reservation were restored to the tribe in 1978. Prior to this decision, however, the reservation was allotted in 1912, with each individual receiving 10 acres instead of the 5 stated in the original 1893 agreement (Bee 1983:95).

By the time of this allotment, the Quechan had experienced great changes. The damming of the Colorado upstream from the reservation reduced the annual, rejuvenating floods, making traditional floodplain farming techniques impractical. The Quechan children continued attending the reservation boarding school and were influenced by its curriculum of assimilation. The Quechan population had declined significantly as a result of European diseases and increased warfare. Although there is some question as to accuracy of these figures, the estimated decline from 4,000 Quechan at the time of their first contact with Europeans to 834 in 1910 leaves little doubt as to the dramatic reduction of the tribal population. By this time, most of the Quechan had abandoned the outlying rancherias and had moved onto land within the reservation. Only one small group of Quechan "homesteaders" remained outside the reservation boundaries, in the area of Somerton (Bee 1983:95-96).

The allotment issue and the consolidation of the six rancheria groups onto the reservation led to internal political struggles and factionalization among the Quechan. By the 1920s and 1930s, conditions for the tribe continued to worsen. Farming was no longer a profitable enterprise, and many Quechan had become wage earners in Yuma working unskilled job, further distancing them from their cultural traditions. In 1936, the tribe voted for a tribal constitution and elected a seven member tribal council. In later

years, this council devoted its support to various antipoverty and community development programs (Bee 1983:95-96).

The Cocopah, whose territory during most of the historical period was located in the southernmost part of the Colorado River delta, were also exposed to the waves of Euroamerican exploration and settlement. Like the Quechan, it appears that the Cocopah population declined as a result of diseases passed on by the newcomers to the region (de Williams 1983:104). Traditionally the Cocopah cultivated crops around the annual spring flooding of the Colorado and migrated seasonally to gather supplemental foodstuffs (de Williams 1974:34, 62). However, in the last half of the nineteenth century, many Cocopah men became very active in the growing steamboat trade along the Colorado River, serving as deckhands or supplying the steamers with wood for fuel. As such activity brought them into closer contact with the Euroamericans, the Cocopah developed an affinity for the goods and practices to which they were introduced and became participants in the market economy. When the steamboat industry went into decline following the arrival of the Southern Pacific Railroad, many Cocopah, who had abandoned their traditional farming activities to work for the steamboats, were hard-pressed to support themselves (de Williams 1974:38).

This situation led some Cocopah groups to leave the lower Colorado delta area early in the twentieth century in search of new employment opportunities, while other groups remained behind in their traditional territories. At this time, members of the Wi Ahwir and the Hwanyak Cocopah groups settled in the vicinity of Somerton, Arizona. Other groups migrated to locations in Baja California and Sonora, Mexico, resulting in the current binational nature of the tribe. The development of irrigation in the Yuma Valley and the need for agricultural day laborers likely attracted the Cocopah to the Somerton area around 1910.

In 1917 the United States government gave legal title to the Cocopah in Arizona for three small parcels of land in the Yuma Valley (Cocopah West Reservation, Cocopah East Reservation, and Cocopah Lots Five and Six), totaling approximately 1,800 acres, that continue to serve as the tribal reservation holdings in the United States. After a lengthy fight for land rights, the Cocopah in Mexico received by presidential decree the communal rights to 143,000 hectares of desert land, including the Cucapa Mountains. In the early 1980s, the Mexican Cocopah were awaiting another decree that would expand their holdings to include irrigable farmland near the Hardy River in Baja California. By the 1960s, the Arizona Cocopah began to organize, sponsoring housing, education, and health programs on the reservation (de Williams 1983:102).

Although by the 1980s the Cocopah went through a period of reviving their traditional crafts and maintained their identity as an ethnic group, many elements of their material culture disappeared. Most dramatically, the Cocopah, who have traditionally been a river people, no longer live on the river. Management of the Colorado River in the twentieth century has severely altered its course and flow and have precluded many of the traditional Cocopah practices that depended on the river and its resources. The section of the Colorado that flows past the one small portion of the American Cocopah reservation on the river is used by the U.S. government for agricultural drainage. Thus the Cocopah, whose lives once centered around the Colorado River, have experienced significant cultural changes in the twentieth century as a result of changes made to the river by Euroamericans (de Williams 1983:103).

As the discussion to this point has attempted to demonstrate, the history of the lower Colorado region is exceptionally rich, with the imprint of three cultures contributing to its social and cultural complexion. The small town of Yuma was attracting new settlers to the region, which seemed poised to become one of the leading agricultural centers in the southwestern United States.

Early Irrigation Efforts

Irrigation has been practiced along the lower Colorado River for centuries. Sources claim that prior to the arrival of Europeans, Native Americans had practiced irrigation agriculture in the valley between Yuma and the Gulf of California for over 1,000 years (Robertson 1942:104). As early as the sixteenth century, Spanish missionaries in Yuma noted that the Quechan were engaged in irrigation farming. Among Euro-americans, several early irrigation efforts were made, although large-scale irrigation in the Yuma area did not take place until the early twentieth century.

Euroamerican irrigation in the Yuma area appears to have begun in the 1870s, with the efforts of Jose Redondo of Yuma. Redondo and his brother established the Hacienda de San Ysidro Ranch, which was located in the valley between the Colorado and Gila Rivers. Although the Redondos had attempted to irrigate their land beginning in the late 1860s, it was not until the 1870s that they realized any success. By 1874, their ranch contained a system of canals and ditches which allowed them to irrigate alfalfa, wheat, barley, and oats (Swanson and Altschul 1991:62).

In 1876, a team of engineers examined routes for a possible canal from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley of California. The surveyors, however, found that the only feasible route for the canal would be through Mexican territory. The U.S. Congress refused to grant any land for irrigation purposes if part of the system was to be placed on Mexican soil (Robertson 1942:106). Several decades would pass before irrigation water in any considerable amount would be brought to the Imperial Valley as well as the Yuma area.

Lerdo Colony

Another early attempt at irrigation came in the late 1870s with the establishment of an experimental farm, 70 miles south of Yuma, on the east side of the Colorado River. The Lerdo Colony, as the farm became known, was located partially on Mexican soil. Agreements were made with the Mexican government that permitted the colony to farm the land. A tract of land approximately 15 miles wide was cultivated as a part of the experiment, beginning with several thousand fruit trees. The colony's land itself was divided among the individual settlers, and when they were not working their own parcels, the farmers were expected to assist in the construction of a large canal. The canal was planned to run from the Colorado River near Pilot Knob, through the settlement, and terminate at the Gulf of California (Figure 21). Because of actions on the part of several unscrupulous colony officials, however, the canal was never built (Robertson 1942:109). The duration of the colony's existence is not currently known, although it is expected not to have survived to the turn-of-the-century.

Algodones Land Grant

The majority of the Yuma Valley was included in a Mexican land grant known as Algodones. The legal nature of the land was in question for years following the Mexican War and ended in a court decision in 1893. At that time, the U.S. government attempted to acquire title to the land. The grant's claim was upheld, however, by U.S. courts in 1893 and again in 1896. In 1898, the U.S. government, after appeals, finally acquired title to the land. During the period of litigation, private companies had been constructing canals throughout the area, in an attempt to develop and settle the land. During the same period squatters had settled throughout the area, and were sold land in the Yuma Valley by representatives of the land grant. Small tracts of land were sold and water was delivered from pumps in the Colorado River. In 1901, the entire area was reopened to entry, and many more settlers moved in (Reclamation 1940:65).

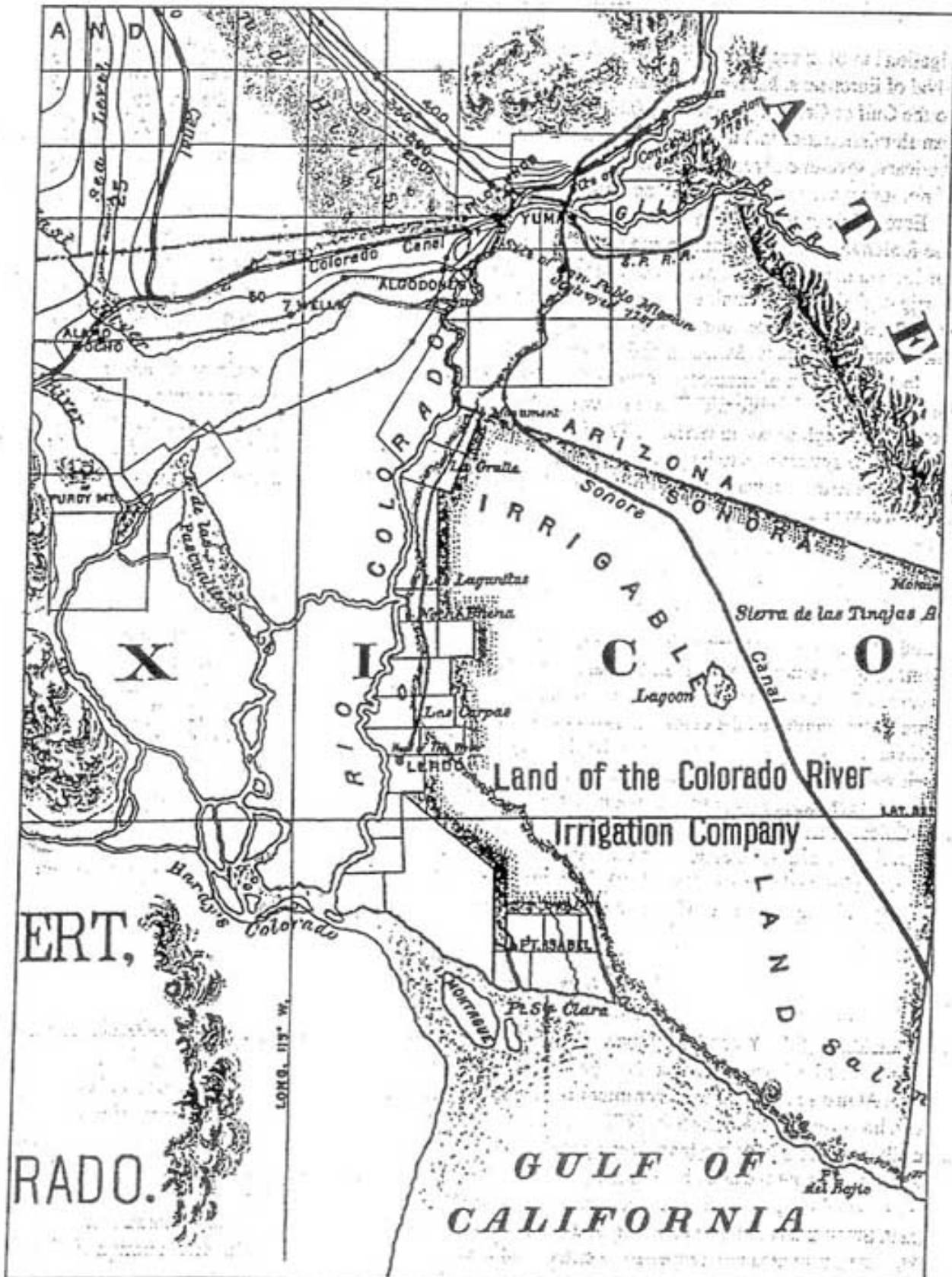


Figure 21. Lower Colorado River showing the Lerdo Colony and the proposed Sonora Canal, 1893 (from Hart 1893).

First Irrigation Companies

Settlers arriving in the Yuma area in the late 1800s realized the potential of the lower Colorado River, and the rich soils of its floodplain. By the 1880s, several irrigation features existed along the lower reaches of both the Colorado and Gila Rivers. Following a major flood in 1891, more-substantial irrigation features were constructed, including a large pump by the Yuma Water and Light Company. Operated by Hiram Blaisdell, the pump provided water for domestic as well as irrigation uses, drawing Colorado River water from a point just east of the Southern Pacific Hotel and Train Depot in Yuma. With the help of this pump, Blaisdell grew the first citrus in the Yuma area. By 1893, the Colorado River Irrigation Company was also established to better exploit the river. This company succeeded in irrigating an area 22 miles long and 6 miles wide, located immediately south of Yuma. The formation of other companies soon followed, including the Cocopah Fruit Company in 1893, and the Irrigation Land and Improvement Company in 1900. The latter company began acquiring smaller companies, consolidating nearly 60 miles of canals and laterals as well as irrigating over 50,000 acres of land. This irrigation was accomplished via a diversion point roughly 3.5 miles southwest of Yuma. By 1900, the Irrigation Land and Improvement Company purchased the Colorado Canal and Levee Company as well as the Eureka Canal Company. This combined company constructed miles of canals in the north Yuma Valley in the first few years of the twentieth century. Shortly thereafter, the company was absorbed into the Reclamation Service under the Yuma Project (see below) (Swanson and Altschul 1991:62).

Attempts to irrigate the Imperial Valley continued under the plan and direction of engineer Charles R. Rockwood, culminating in the formation of the California Development Company in 1899. By 1900, work commenced on a canal system that would bring water from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley, and by 1901 the first water was delivered (Robertson 1942:112). Some of the early irrigators attempted to subdivide the land and sell it to prospective settlers. Truly large-scale irrigation of the Imperial Valley, however, began in the 1930s following the completion of the All American Canal.

The Lower Colorado Region in the Twentieth Century

The Growth of Modern Yuma

The arrival of the railroad brought notice that Yuma was a growing town. The prosperity, however, did not last long. The Colorado River flooded in 1891, destroying all of the buildings east of Main Street. All of the stores but one, all restaurants except two, and all saloons except that at the Southern Pacific Hotel were destroyed. The reconstruction that followed the 1891 flood began to define what can be called modern Yuma. Although adobe block remained the building material of choice, the wealthier businessmen recognized the attendant dangers of using adobe near water and rebuilt structures of brick and concrete (Laird 1986).

As the town of Yuma approached the new century, the social makeup and dynamics of the community began to change. The steamboat trade and the recent arrival of the railroad helped Yuma to become the largest town on the Colorado River and the third largest in the Arizona territory. At this time almost two thirds of the town's 1,200 residents were Sonorans (Lingenfelter 1978:60-61). This situation reflected the significant role Hispanics played in settling the Yuma Crossing area and the mining communities further upriver and to the east. Yet despite the large number of residents, Hispanics never really established a cultural dominance in Yuma, with the affairs of the community controlled largely by the Anglo minority (Officer 1987:310; Westover 1966:81-84). The attitudes toward Hispanics held by many Anglo-American settlers are informative about the racial lines that divided Yuma society at this time. Historian James Officer has documented cases of discrimination and harassment suffered by Hispanics in

the Yuma Crossing area dating back to the ferry operations of the early 1850s (1987:248). Many newcomers to the region considered themselves socially and intellectually superior to the Hispanic residents they encountered (Officer 1987:310-311). Such attitudes surely influenced social relations and shaped the development of the Yuma community during the late nineteenth century.

As discussed earlier, Anglos viewed and treated Native Americans with even greater disregard than they did Hispanics. After Major Heintzelman's campaign to subdue the Quechan unrest in the 1850s, Hispanics and Anglos came to settle the Yuma Crossing area and took for themselves land and resources previously controlled by the Quechan. As Yuma grew in size and prosperity toward the end of the nineteenth century, some Quechan were drawn to town and took menial, low-paying jobs—the only employment opportunities available to them. When the town population numbered 1,200 residents, about 500 Quechan were said to have lived on the outskirts (Lingenfelter 1978:60). The Quechan who worked in or frequented town were treated as inferiors and were criticized by the Anglo "gentility" in the newspapers for their drunken behavior and dress (Bee 1989:55). By the early 1880s, envious Anglo citizens and business interests requested the establishment of a reservation so that the fertile bottomlands occupied by the Quechan could be opened up for themselves (Bee 1981:19). The beginning of the twentieth century saw the coming of new waves of Anglo-American settlers who brought with them vast amounts of capital and visions for transforming the lower Colorado region. The resulting changes altered the demographic makeup of the community and perpetuated the marginalization experienced by the Native Americans and Hispanics in the Yuma area.

Yuma continued to grow at a remarkable pace in the early twentieth century. Expanding well beyond the downtown area, residences appeared around the town periphery and the population grew to 3,000 residents by 1908. Naturally, the increasing population required a larger food base. In response, the Yuma Reclamation Project, begun in 1904, resulted in the construction of Laguna Dam, located 10 miles north-east of the city. The main function of the dam was to harness the waters of the Colorado River for use in irrigating the rich bottomlands to the north and south of the city. When completed, the dam was almost 1 mile long, and raised the water level 10 feet from its natural elevation. The cost of the project up to 1910, including dam, levees, and some canals, was \$4,120,000, or about 15 dollars for each acre expected to be irrigated (Robertson 1942:120).

Yuma experienced its greatest growth between 1900 and 1920. People came to the city and surrounding area soon after the Yuma Reclamation Project became a reality. Investment in irrigation and agricultural activities were strongly encouraged when water from the Colorado and Gila Rivers became obtainable at reasonable rates. With the increased population, the city began a phase of extensive construction, including schools, a courthouse, and several civic projects. Automobiles arrived in Yuma during 1913, and two years later a road bridge was constructed across the Colorado River to join Arizona and California.

During 1916, the Colorado River flooded again. Most low-lying areas of Yuma, including downtown, were devastated. Whereas many of the wealthier businessmen had constructed their establishments of brick and concrete to withstand such floods, many of the adobe and timber structures were washed away. Yuma, once again, began to rebuild. This time the devastation was motive enough to prompt the city council to decree that adobe construction would no longer be an acceptable practice in the downtown area (Laird 1986). The 1916 flood was of little deterrence to the redevelopment and continuing prosperity of Yuma. By 1920, the city was well established and the population had increased to 5,000 residents. The foundation for development that would characterize Yuma throughout the 1930s, and well into the 1940s, had been laid.

Yuma Valley Communities

When the dispute about the Algodones Land Grant was finally resolved in 1898, the land formerly included within the grant claim was reopened for public entry. The early years of the twentieth century witnessed the settlement of this area and the establishment of new communities centered around agriculture, made possible by the irrigation features developed as part of the Yuma Project of the U.S. Reclamation Service.

Although there were some people reported in the Somerton area as early as 1895, the first post office for the community was not established until 1898. Somerton was made an official town site in 1909 and this event was celebrated with the opening of the first store. The town experienced rapid growth in 1917 with the construction of the Warrenrite road from Yuma (the first paved road in the Yuma Valley) and the introduction of cotton in the lower Yuma Valley. By 1920, Somerton had a population of over 1,500 residents and had become a center for cotton ginning and buyers. The town was wired with electricity, featured two banks, two lumber yards, farm implement stores, blacksmith services, several commercial companies, a theater, hotels, a doctor, and a dental surgeon. Many of the laborers who worked the cotton fields were Mexican immigrants who fled the hardships resulting from the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Many of these field workers and their families settled on the fringes of the town in labor housing camps, such as Burro Town (Arizona Historical Society, Century House-Somerton Ephemera Folder).

With the crash in cotton prices between 1920-1922, Somerton's growth slowed considerably and the community never reached its anticipated prosperity. By the 1930s, other crops such as cantaloupes, alfalfa, and citrus were introduced to the area, but the town was no longer a booming agricultural center. Agriculture continues to be the main industry around Somerton, and the majority of the town's residents depend on it for their livelihood (Arizona Historical Society, Century House-Somerton Ephemera Folder; Woznicki 1995:180).

Another town established in the early twentieth century in the Yuma Valley was Gadsden, Arizona. Located 19 miles south of Yuma and 4 miles north of the international boundary, the town site was selected in 1915 by the partners in the investing real estate company because of the rich surrounding farmlands and the proximity of the Yuma Valley Railroad (owned and operated by the U.S. Reclamation Service). Gadsden also grew quickly in its early years as a result of the thriving cotton industry. The town featured an array of businesses and institutions, including a department store, pool hall, restaurant, barbershop, bar, drugstore, butcher shop, mercantile store, bank, theater, school, two churches, and two service stations. The businesses prospered as farmers brought their cotton to town and waited for it to be ginned in one of the five gins in the community. In 1919, the *Gadsden Clarion*, the town's first newspaper, began circulation. Like Somerton, however, the town of Gadsden went into a period of decline when cotton prices dropped. Town businesses closed as many people traveled to the larger communities of Somerton or Yuma to do their shopping (Arizona Historical Society, Century House-Gadsden Ephemera Folder).

The Colorado River has played an important part in the history of the communities of Gadsden and Somerton. While the river created the fertile bottomlands that made agriculture possible in the Yuma Valley, the threat of floods presented a constant menace to the communities located along its banks. The subsequent damming of the Colorado upstream and the construction of levies and drainage features have protected these towns from the dangers of flooding and have facilitated the irrigation of crops in the Yuma Valley (Arizona Historical Society, Century House-Gadsden Ephemera Folder).

One town that has developed more recently in the Yuma Valley is San Luis, Arizona. Located directly across from San Luis, Sonora, this small community grew up largely as a border town, providing services and access to its much larger Mexican namesake. The oldest store in San Luis dates back to 1954. In light of the recent NAFTA policies and the resulting heightened trade between the United States and Mexico, the twin border communities are anticipating a significant economic and population boom in the

years to come (Arizona Historical Society, Century House-San Luis Ephemera Folder; Woznicki 1995:190).

Agriculture in the Yuma Valley

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most of the settlers arriving in the Yuma area settled to the south and southwest of the town. The soil in this area was viewed as the best for irrigation and farming purposes. As more settlers arrived, the need for irrigated lands increased. Several plans were made to carry water from the Colorado River to these populated areas. Most of the proposed diversion features, however, would have to travel through Mexican territory en route to their final destinations. Under one venture, an agreement was worked out with Mexico, whereby the canals could be constructed, and one-half of the water would go to American farmers and the other half to Mexican farmers. Many of these Mexican farmers were actually Americans who had settled in that portion of Sonora previously and had begun farming the land (Robertson 1942:114-115). The venture proved to be unprofitable for the canal owners soon after its inception, however.

In the Yuma Valley, several private companies were formed to irrigate and develop the area, including the Yuma Valley Union Land and Water Company, the Greene Land and Cattle Company, and the Colorado Valley Pumping and Irrigating Company. The latter company was one of the only truly successful efforts. The company constructed a steam pumping plant close to Yuma that irrigated approximately 2,500 acres in the upper Yuma Valley (Reclamation 1912). In addition to numerous canals, these companies also constructed small levees to hold the Colorado River in check. The early attempts at irrigation, however, were hampered by the presence of silt in the canals as well as the violent flooding of the Colorado River (Pfaff et al. 1992:46). To overcome these problems, and truly exploit the farming potential of the Yuma area, the federal government would have to take a leading role.

The Newlands/Reclamation Act

On June 17, 1902, the U.S. Congress passed the Newlands, or Reclamation, Act. Named for Senator Francis Newlands of Nevada, the man largely responsible for its conception and passage, the act radically altered large portions of the arid west. The act sought to reclaim, through irrigation, marginal lands that would otherwise be unfit for cultivation or habitation. The idea behind reclamation of marginal lands was stated (Pfaff et al. 1992:28) succinctly by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902:

The object of the government is to dispose of the land to settlers who will build homes upon it. To accomplish this the water must be brought within their reach. . . . Our people as a whole will profit, for successful home making is but another name for the upbuilding of the nations.

The government realized that the massive amounts of money required to successfully irrigate these lands could not be borne by individual settlers. Under the authority of the Reclamation Act, the government decided to fund irrigation projects, particularly in the arid West. Although they had made previous attempts to assist in irrigation, most of these attempts were project specific, no comprehensive program had been implemented. The Reclamation Act created the Reclamation Service, which was charged with assisting in the development (through irrigation and agricultural programs) of the arid West. Initially, the Reclamation Service was under the auspices of the U.S. Geological Survey, but eventually became an independent bureau. Under the Act, the Reclamation Service was charged with opening land to settlement. In theory, the Reclamation Service would be repaid for the cost of the project by those who ulti-

mately benefitted from it. Repayment would be made over time by individual settlers or agriculturalists as well as by independent water districts through the sale of the water. The Reclamation Act contained several other provisions, most important of which was the establishment of a fund, dedicated for further reclamation projects. The fund received repayment monies from the sale of land and water, in addition to federal sources, allowing for ongoing large-scale irrigation projects.

The Yuma Irrigation Project

The lower Colorado region was one of the first to receive Reclamation dollars, in the form of the Yuma Irrigation Project (YIP). The project was conceived in 1902, with land surveys beginning immediately thereafter. The project was finally authorized by the Secretary of the Interior on May 10, 1904. Prior to construction, the Reclamation Service withdrew public land in the areas along the Gila and Colorado Rivers where irrigation was most feasible. Over 250 private water users were located in the Yuma Valley prior to the withdrawal, most of whom were situated close to Yuma (Pfaff et al. 1992:85). The southern Yuma Valley was relatively unclaimed and unsettled at this time (Figure 22).

The force behind the YIP, the Reclamation Act, permitted individuals to acquire land with certain stipulations. The stipulations limited available acreage for each settler and requirements for the eventual repayment for the water. A prospective settler was charged \$6.50 for a homestead filing fee, followed by \$85.00 per acre for the YIP water. Settlers were required to live on their land, and were allowed six months after filing their claim to occupy the property. The first YIP water was delivered in 1910 in the Reservation Division. The Valley Division received project water following the completion of the siphon in 1912. By 1913, the Yuma Valley's farm population had grown from 1,500 to approximately 3,500 farms, cultivating some 11,200 (Pfaff et al. 1992). Many of the landowners in the Yuma area were absentee farmers who leased their land to tenants.

Reclamation utilized what became known as the unit system for distributing water to individual settlers. Settlers were limited to water for 160 acres of land, if the land was already privately owned; water for 40 acres if a special homestead dispensation was obtained; and water for 20 acres of land on the Indian Reservation. The unit system was designed to prevent the accumulation of water rights by a few landowners. According to the plan, water was distributed to settlers via main canals and laterals, but it was the settlers' responsibility to construct their own sublaterals to carry the water to their fields.

The Reclamation Service's first operations involved the construction of several levees along the Colorado to better control the river. But the Reclamation Service quickly learned the pitfalls of trying to tame a river as powerful as the Colorado. During 1905, the Colorado River changed courses rather unexpectedly one of the preliminary irrigation diversions was completed. The river broke through the diversion as well as a levee, following an easy path all the way to the Salton Sea. The river almost changed courses forever because of this accident, but was finally brought back to its regular channel in 1907 through the efforts of the Reclamation Service. Following another major course change in 1909, it became clear to Reclamation that a system of levees would be required.

Laguna Dam

The first major attempt to harness the Colorado River construction, and integral to the success of the YIP, was the construction of Laguna Dam, located 9 miles upstream of town. But the construction of a major dam along the Colorado River presented significant challenges. Because of the lack of bedrock upon which to build, Laguna's design was unique among American dams and was actually modeled after one found in India. Construction of the dam began in 1905 by a private contractor. Contract difficulties ensued, however, and the completion of the project was assumed by Reclamation in 1907. Following dam completion in 1909, harnessed water was soon diverted for irrigation purposes.

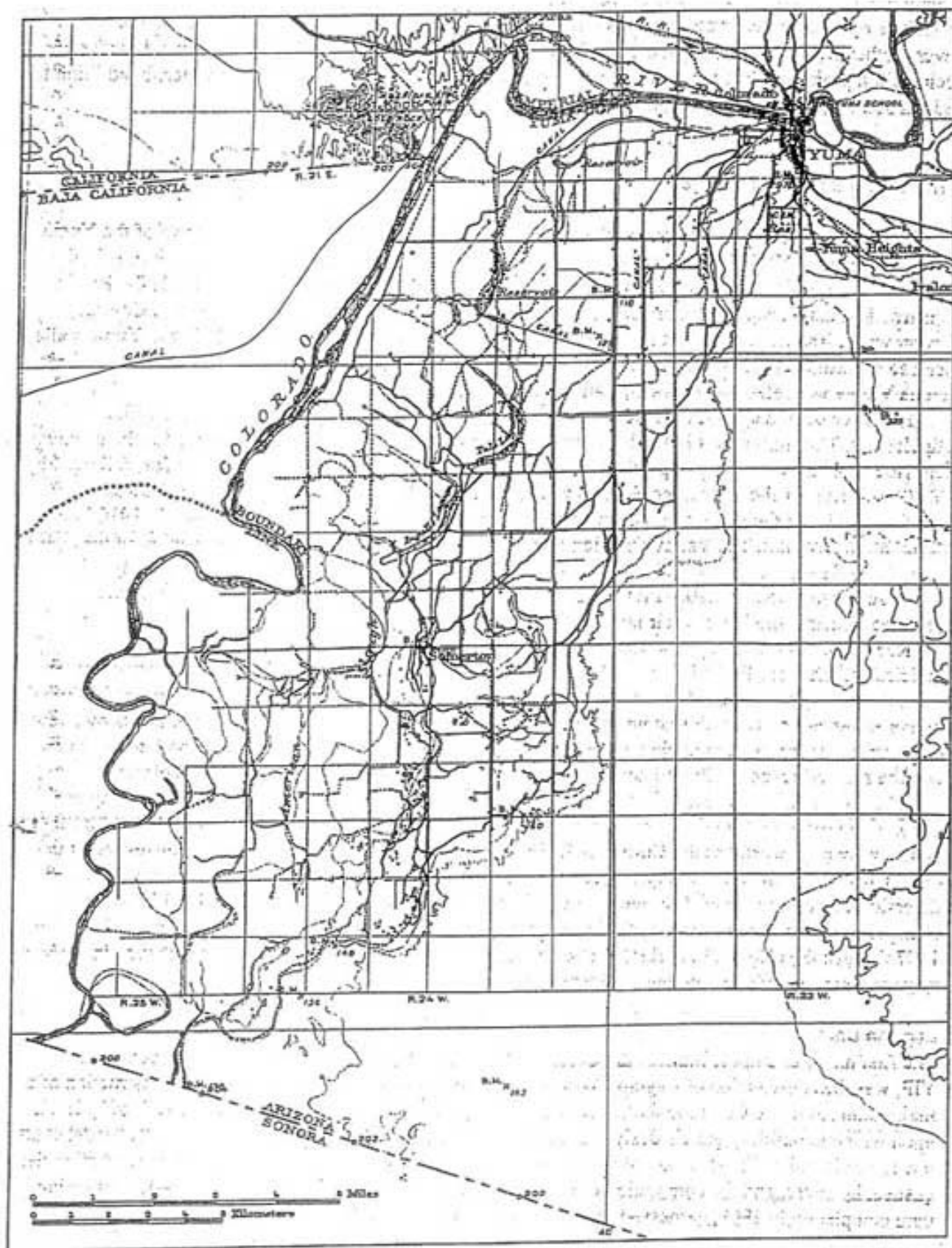


Figure 22. Topographic map of the lower Colorado River in 1903, illustrating the nature of the region prior to the construction of the Yuma Irrigation Project.